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SUBJECT: SEPTEMBER TURKMENISTAN MEDIA COVERAGE OMITS MYRADOVA,
KATZEN COVERAGE

REF: 1) ASHGABAT 1002, 2) 998, 3) 987, 4) 963, 5) Embassy Press
Releases on 9/22/06 and 9/27/06

SUMMARY

11. (U) Local media coverage of mission events in September featured the embassy's ceremony announcing the 2006-2007 Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation grant winners. While generally positive and colorful, the coverage failed to mention the U.S. Government's substantial financial investment in preserving Turkmenistan's cultural heritage. Meanwhile, local media provided no coverage of the death in custody of journalist Ogulsapar Myradova or the visit of Peace Corps Regional Director for Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia Jay Katzen. End Summary.

COVERAGE OF AMBASSADOR'S FUND 2006-07 GRANTS POSITIVE BUT INACCURATE

12. (U) On September 28, state dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 33,221) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,161) printed articles, based on embassy statements, about the embassy's September 27 ceremony to announce the winners of the 2006-2007 Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation grants. The articles inaccurately quoted Charg d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer Brush that "the U.S. Government has been facilitating implementation of various scientific projects and supporting the preservation of cultural heritage in Turkmenistan." (Note: Brush's statement did not mention "scientific" cooperation, but the term "scientific" is often used by the host government to lend greater academic weight to events such as Ruhnama conferences. End Note.) The dailies accurately described the purpose and content of the two new projects, as well as recently completed and ongoing Ambassador's Fund projects in Turkmenistan.

13. (U) On September 30, semi-independent weekly "Zaman-Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 18,535) drew heavily from the embassy's press release and misquoted Charge Brush, stating that "such projects on cultural preservation would give great opportunity to Americans to learn more about Turkmen cultural heritage and history." (Note: Brush's statement emphasized that both Americans and Turkmen could learn from the project. End Note.)

14. (U) The Russia-based state-sponsored website TURKMENISTAN.RU (English, Russian) posted an article with similar content. On September 29, the Times of Central Asia newswire (English) provided coverage based on the TURKMENISTAN.RU article.

15. (U) None of these outlets provided detail on the U.S.

Government's financial commitment to preserving Turkmenistan's heritage; per post's press release, the United States has contributed over \$80,000 for cultural preservation projects in Turkmenistan over the past five years.

STATE MEDIA IGNORES DEATH OF LOCAL JOURNALIST

¶6. (U) From September 14 through September 27 major international newswires Associated Press, Dow Jones International News, BBC Monitoring, Reuters, Agence France Presse and ITAR-TASS provided broad coverage of international concern over the death in jail of local journalist Ogulsapar Myradova. The reports described the concern of the United States, the UN and other international organizations over Myradova's death and of public protests by members of human rights groups and by Reporters Without Borders at the Turkmenistan Embassies in France and Russia. These international reports drew from a small amount of information that Myradova's body bore a major head injury and evidence of strangulation, and speculated that the death resulted from abuse in prison. U.S. newswires U.S. Fed News, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Raw Story and Lawrence Journal World provided similar coverage of the issue.

¶7. (U) Meanwhile, local media completely ignored the event and had ceased coverage of Myradova's case in late June; she was sentenced to six years in prison on August 25 on weapons possession charges. State media provided no coverage of the trial. (Note: Watan TV news aired a story on June 20 accusing Myradova of the charges for which she was eventually sentenced. End Note.)

JAY KATZEN VISIT RECEIVES NO STATE MEDIA COVERAGE

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¶8. (U) On September 21, Peace Corps Regional Director Jay Katzen had official meetings with Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashit Meredov and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov. The embassy's press release emphasized that, during his meetings, Katzen stressed the importance of the educational cooperation to the health of the U.S.-Turkmenistan bilateral relationship. Neither of the meetings received state media coverage.

COMMENT

¶9. (U) Post noted that, despite inaccuracies and gaps in coverage of the September 27 Ambassador's Fund event, local media provided more than the customary level of detail in drawing from embassy statements. In contrast, state media continued to avoid coverage of topics that could be construed as critical of the current regime by ignoring both Myradova's death and Katzen's visit. Post did not anticipate a complete blackout on the Katzen visit, as stories on Peace Corps volunteers and events tend to receive positive and high-profile coverage.

BRUSH